

COMMUNIST
BOOKS

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33137
P312

A SKETCH OF THE RUSSIAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT.

THE Russian trade union movement which had its origin in the 1905 revolution, and which received a temporary check by the reaction of 1908-1910, began to develop anew in 1911-1914, when it was again suppressed by the patriotic and military reaction of 1914-1916; it nevertheless struggled on till the beginning of the second revolution in March, 1917. From a political point of view the trade unions which then existed proved to be the strongest, though their membership was but a few hundred.

During the "storm and stress" period in a country ignorant of public life and with a proletariat unaccustomed to organisation, independence and spontaneous discipline, the trade union movement of 1905-7 could not lay down any great plans for organisation, its chief object being to draw the masses into the unions on the largest scale possible, and to train them in discipline and spontaneous and independent action. Thus the pressure of capitalism was met by the organised masses. Political life was too stormy and the Russian worker too much oppressed for the unions to acquire more than an insignificant numerical strength in those days. The unions were confined to the highly qualified and to the better-paid and class conscious elements of the working class.

Nevertheless, these unions took the form of organising centres, which exercised great influence on the unorganised workers. While not including amongst their members the vast masses of workers, these trade unions served as centres around which the masses grouped themselves, especially in time of economic conflicts. The reactionary attitude of the authorities caused new conflicts for the defence of the economic conquests obtained in 1905 and even for the very existence of the trade unions. The whole movement was hampered by continuous police raids and repression, and any rational development and expansion of the trade unions were thus frustrated.

The unions were of a purely local character, and their form of organisation rather complex. In most cases they were organised on a craft basis, although a movement towards the formation of industrial unions was already asserting itself. This was specially noticeable amongst the vanguard of the proletariat (the metal workers, composi-

tors, etc.). But the principle of industrial unions was not yet fully understood even by the leaders. Thus, for instance, some unions whilst embracing all the workers in a certain branch of industry* would sometimes also include the workers of like crafts in other branches of industry. For example, the metal workers' union comprised not only the workers occupied in metal industries, but also all metal workers employed in other industries.

The membership fees were also on a complex basis. Three different systems often existed simultaneously: contributions on a percentage basis, fixed contributions, and contributions according to categories.

From the nature of the trade union struggle, the unification of kindred unions in the provinces as well as all over the country became a necessity; in like manner local and joint councils of unions sprang up to help in the co-ordination of the economic struggle and to facilitate the solution of questions common to the whole trade union movement. The first and second trade union conferences were, for that period, the most important efforts to bring about such a unification. But the fierce and merciless repression exercised by Czarist autocracy crushed not only the combination of the unions which was just then beginning, but the whole trade union movement.

Conditions were not very much better for the trade unions organised in 1911-14. Troubles and disturbances marked their precarious existence. Arrests of leaders, domiciliary visits and suppression of various organisations met the trade unions at every step. But in spite of these labour conditions, which differed little from those of a convict prison, the trade unions used every opportunity to establish their position legally, though they were often obliged to resort to a semi-legal or even to quite an illegal existence.

TRADE UNIONS UNDER MARCH REVOLUTION.

At the beginning of the February (March) Revolution of 1917, one is not surprised to learn that there were in existence in a few towns but a dozen trade unions, each with a membership of a few dozen.

The cessation of fighting at the front caused trade unions to spring up everywhere. The workers in the large factories were the first to organise into unions. In some instances the new organisations were modelled upon what remained of the old ones, which had a few dozen members, but in most cases the new unions were formed in a few days out of nothing, so to speak, and in a month's

* *i.e.*, Engineers, boiler makers, and others in railway workshops, etc.

time there was in being an organisation numbering tens of thousands.

"The Moscow metal workers began to organise their union almost on the very day of the Revolution. Members were enrolled in a small room, the residence of an old comrade. In a very short time they were able to convene a conference which took place on March 29th, when an organising committee was elected. The membership had already reached the figure of 16,423." In these words, V. Polonski, the former secretary and one of the founders, described the foundation of the metal workers' trade union in the fifth issue of *The Moscow Metalworker* (November 15th, 1917). This simple story represents, with a few modifications, the history of the formation of most of the trade unions during the period of the first revolution of 1917.

The most characteristic features of that period are the crude formation and the rapid numerical growth of the trade unions. From the beginning the trade unions had to take over the direction of the disorganised economic struggle, and assume the role of arbiters in a series of conflicts between workers and capitalists. Then the trade unions developed rapidly with almost military precision; trade union labour exchanges on a non-governmental basis were established for the registration of the unemployed, with sections for settling disputes between committees, and sections for fixing and regulating rates of pay. In the important industries shop committees were organised in factories and workshops. Under such conditions, needless to say, harmonious forms of trade union organisation, trade union steadfastness, and strict adherence to the principles of trade union tactics and discipline were not all that one would wish. These were but rough and ready methods in a movement started without a common plan, common ties, and without a common initiative.

From the point of view of organisation one could perceive the same mixture of craft union and industrial union principles, which, as we have already pointed out, prevailed in the preceding periods. But at the same time a more conscious tendency towards the principle of organisation by industries was noticeable.

Locally, the trade unions were grouped around a central council, which gave information and co-ordinated the activities of the trade unions from a political standpoint. These councils were organised and elected in various ways (one vote per trade union irrespective of numerical strength, by a proportionate vote, etc.). They had no fixed budget, their funds depended in most cases on occasional subsidies (the Moscow Council was subsidised by the

Soviet of Workers' and Peasants' Delegates), collections, etc.; there were hardly any membership fees, and although those in existence were fixed at a very low figure, payments were irregular.

The chief aims which these trade union councils should pursue (the elaboration of common rules and instructions, the study of the economic situation, assistance to the unions in the economic struggle, the organisation of new trade unions, etc.) were to a great extent within the jurisdiction of parallel organisations: the labour departments of the local Soviets of workers and peasants. These departments, in addition to their own special functions, initiated strikes, acted as arbiters, and organised arbitration courts.

All this multiplicity of forms of organisation and of mutual relations was not conducive to the development of an exact conception of the required forms of organisation, nor to harmony and steadfastness within the trade unions. It was only in June that intercourse between trade unions was initiated and the first regional conferences were convened. In the absence of a central organisation embracing the whole of Russia and able to co-ordinate all the forces, the trade unions of Petrograd, Moscow, and of other industrial centres, took the initiative, and extended their sphere of influence into the provinces, where, step by step, mutual relations were established by means of investigations, exchange of materials, correspondence, and occasionally by sending delegates.

The reports presented in July at the third Trade Union Conference testified to the marvellous growth of the trade union movement, which was represented at that conference by 967 trade unions and 51 federations of trade unions, with a total membership of 1,475,429.

Though this imposing figure may testify to the gigantic numerical growth of the trade union movement, it was also a proof of its weakness, and showed the loose and undefined character of the organisation. For, while the membership had grown enormously during these three months since the March Revolution, the unions had not succeeded in developing the machinery of their organisations in a satisfactory manner. During that period the number of members was not based on monthly fees, but on the right of entry.

It was not until the first Congress of Workers' Trade Unions that the real idea of what constituted a member was introduced, and that only those who paid their membership fees were recognised as members.

There had not been sufficient time, during the three months that preceded the third Conference, to utilise ade-

quately all the available new material, because of the fierce political struggle, the sporadic strikes, and the lack of mutual collaboration. The desperate struggle between the two principal parties in the working-class movement—on the one hand the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries, and on the other the Bolsheviks, who already formed an effective opposition—resulted in giving precedence to the burning political questions of the day, thus forcing economic matters into the background.

The third Conference was the first indication of the movement of the proletariat which sprang up at that time, and emancipated itself from the influence of opportunist politicians and petty bourgeois socialists. While the "coalition" socialists were in an overwhelming majority in the Soviets, and the Bolsheviks had only one-fifth of the votes in the Congress of Soviets, an uncertain equilibrium was established at the third Trade Union Conference. The resolutions passed at that conference and the constitution of the Central Provisional Committee elected were a clear reflection of the lack of stability of the majority. The purely rhetorical character of the resolutions and the abstract nature of the principles voted upon were a proof of the insufficient development of the movement, and of a certain inexperience in working out in a practical way the questions discussed by the Conference; for this practical work had been done in the factories and workshops.

Without dwelling on the divergencies of opinion in the trade union movement on the principal questions of proletarian politics, it is only right to credit this Conference with two great achievements as far as the trade union movement is concerned: (1) The creation of the first Central Trade Union Organisation; and (2) the establishment of the principle of organisation by industries.

At the Conference in 1906 the principle of concentration was first noticeable in the trade union movement, but now it made great strides forward. The formula: "The Conference recommended to the workers not to divide the trade union organisations by small craft sub-divisions," asserted itself much more definitely at this third Conference because it was incumbent on it to discuss the establishment of gigantic trade unions embracing hundreds of trades (metal workers, textiles, etc.). Now the Conference chose the formula: "The workers must organise themselves in trade unions, not according to brotherhoods and trades, but on an industrial basis, so that all workers of one enterprise should belong to the same trade union, even though engaged in different crafts and not employed in the same shop." Although this formula can hardly be called a clear and precise definition of industrial

organisation, the fact that the new principle of such organisation was recognised does credit to this Conference.

TRADE UNIONS UNDER BOLSHEVISM.

However, it was only after the October (November) 1917 Revolution that the trade unions were able to attain their most important demands through the intervention of the organs of the proletarian government; in this manner they were freed from the necessity of continual strikes and conflicts with the capitalists. Not until the central Councils assumed a more uniform character, and from information bureaux became by the very force of circumstances vanguard organisations, were the trade unions able to inaugurate their re-organisation on an industrial basis. For this purpose it became necessary to adopt a clearer definition of this principle and to form trade union committees invested with sufficient authority to act as impartial judges in such questions as disputes over demarcation of membership, and at the same time to combat the brotherhood and craft prejudices which guided some of the workers' industrial groups.

The work of the trade union movement could only be seriously undertaken after the first National Trade Union Congress, which adopted a clearer definition of organisation on an industrial basis, and was instrumental in the organisation of a whole series of national trade union congresses, and consequently in the formation of national trade union federations.

The fusion of small trade unions into great federative industrial organisations having for its aim the amalgamation of all salaried workers in an industrial enterprise into one union and *vice versa*, met with great difficulties, such as the antagonism on the one hand between the workers in the shops and factories and those in the bureaux and offices, and on the other hand, between the State employees (tehinovniks) and the other clerical workers. This obstacle was only removed after prolonged educational propaganda and by the abolition of the barriers which formerly separated the various categories of workers of the proletarian community.

After the October (November) 1917 Revolution, which abolished rank, orders and other class privileges (which had placed State servants into a special category), and which introduced the republican *régime* into the workshops, enabling the workers to enter the highest State Departments and economic centres, these causes of antagonism were removed. Then the social and economic position of the workers and employees in the new republic of workers and peasants became more equalised, and a

common ground for collaboration was established among them. But the political sabotage against the Government on the part of the higher officials hindered for a long time, almost until the middle of 1918, the process of unification, and it was not until this sabotage was brought to an end, and when the antagonism between these two categories of workers had subsided, that it became possible to organise on an industrial basis on a comprehensive scale.

The October (November) 1917 Revolution not only prepared the ground for the development of the trade union movement, it helped in linking the various unions together and in the creation of national trade unions. The most important of these steps were the regulation of salaries and conditions of labour on a normal scale and the re-organisation and direction of industry. These functions of the trade unions, in the capital as well as in the provinces, forced the weaker trade unions to amalgamate with other unions, and brought about the formation of national trade union federations.

The fact that the Soviet Government recognised trade union councils as representative of the economically organised proletariat, and called on them to co-operate with the Government in all questions concerning labour conditions (sinking of unemployment funds, social insurance, revision and rectification of rates of pay during the first period of the regulation of salaries by the State), raised the authority of the trade union councils and forced them to concentrate on strengthening and perfecting their administrative and economic organisation.

In an atmosphere of fierce class struggle which took the form of a continuous civil war against the landowners and capitalists, and which was subsidised by the imperialists of Western Europe, a war in which the trade unions took a very active part, one saw the development of the local trade union Soviets take its course without the direct influence of the national Soviets, which concentrated their chief attention on the national trade union federations, and only rarely visited the local ones. This was the reason why the resolutions on the question of organisation both at the third Conference as well as at the first Congress, dealt in very vague terms with the trade union Soviets. It was only at the second National Trade Union Congress of the Russian Confederation of Labour that the aims and principles of the organisation of these Soviets were defined. It is true that a resolution of the first Congress recommended the local trade union Soviets "to do everything in their power to bring about the amalgamation of the unions covering allied or interdependent trades into one industrial union," and thereby extend its function of



these Soviets; besides strengthening their position as local centres of the trade union movement. The question of the organisation of trade union Soviets themselves was not dealt with, however, until the second Congress. How important the position of the trade union Soviets was in the trade union movement is best seen by comparing the figures of the third Conference with those of the first and second Congresses. At the third Conference there were represented fifty-one Central Bureaux (known later as Trade Union Soviets), at the first Trade Union Congress there were forty-eight Trade Union Soviets, and at the second Trade Union Congress there were eighty-two Trade Union Soviets. The fall in the figures at the first Congress as compared with those at the third Conference is accounted for by the fact that the basis of representation was more restricted at the first Congress, a fact which is corroborated by the numbers of trade unionists represented by the Central Bureaux (Trade Union Soviets). The fifty-one Trade Union Soviets present at the Third Conference represented 1,120,819 members, and the forty-eight present at the first Congress represented 1,878,000 members.

Not until the second Congress had the process of trade union unification found definite expression. The resolution dealing with the question of organisation, defined the general outline of the new structure, both vertically and horizontally, fixing the role and functions of the Government Soviets, subordinating to them the Ueizd (district) Soviets as branches with limited autonomy. This resulted in the systematic execution of the plan of organisation by industries, in large centres, by the amalgamation of several national centres and by the convocation of national congresses for the unification of parallel or similar organisations. The result in the provinces was the amalgamation of branches of national trade unions (local trade unions), these being energetically assisted by the Soviets of local trade unions, which are thoroughly disciplined branches of the National Confederation of Labour (of the Central Soviet of Trade Unions) working under the latter's instructions.

N.B.—First Congress took place *after* third Conference; the writer uses the term Congress for T.U. Conferences under Bolshevik *régime*.